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Where to Go from the New Terrain?

In Response to CrimethInc.

Gabriel Kuhn

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Retrieved on 3 August 2023 from
alpineanarchist.org/r_crimethinc.

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A few weeks ago, CrimethInc. published the essay "Fighting in the New Terrain: What's Changed Since the 20th Century", hoping to "inspire further analysis and strategizing." The text confirms CrimethInc. qualities that are hard to deny even for the project's harshest critics: an eagerness to push radical politics forward, a commitment to making the world a better place, an ability to present ideas both coherently and comprehensibly, and, maybe in particular, a readiness to engage in self-reflection and self-criticism. How many authors are willing to admit that "today, much of what we proclaimed has become passé"? It is this kind of honesty that allows for critical engagement based on solidarity.

The basic assumption of "Fighting in the New Terrain" can hardly be challenged: much has changed over the last decade – politically, economically, culturally, ecologically – and we need to respond. If the anarchist movement – emerging as the main contender of capitalism in the 1990s, not least as a consequence of state socialism's fall – wants to remain not just "the only game in

town,” as CrimethInc. suggests, but indeed a threatening game, we need to update our analysis, our tactics, and also our ambitions.

There is little point here in reciting CrimethInc.’s observations, you can simply go to the original piece. All of the basic points – the analysis of labor, the capitalist appropriation of subculture, etc. – are convincing. The crucial question is: what are we going to do now?

The text ponders the possible consequences of ”escalating conflict.” But what kind of ”conflict” and ”escalation” are we talking about? This remains unspecified, although rioting is used as an example. There is nothing wrong with a good riot. However, if rioting defines ”escalating conflict” – not necessarily the text’s message! – we simply stand no chance. Confrontation on that level can only be successful if you have at least somewhat similar means and if you are at least somewhat ready to employ them. The powers of the state and capital have become so horrendous that this is simply no option.

This also reflects on the insurrectionist strains within the movement. Again, there is nothing wrong with a good riot, so there is nothing wrong with a good insurrection either. However, in order to contribute to social change, an insurrection must entail more than simply seizing a moment – it must be a part of a wider struggle including tireless organizing, tedious everyday work, and diligent preparation for society’s transformation. Riots and insurrections have their place in this process, but to make them the center of our activism means to overrate one aspect at the cost of others. Mass uprisings can only lead to a radical social transformation if they are embedded in mass organizing. The dichotomies between the ”insurrectionist” and the ”organizational” strains of anarchism are a counterproductive flaw adopted from the left that many anarchists claim to hate so much. Things become even worse when accusations of ”lifestylism” enter the picture – in this context, it seems fortunate that the authors of ”Fighting in the New Terrain” clearly state that ”despite everything, we stand by our initial hunch

stones – but we need concrete ideas to at least have something to talk about.

6. A lot of the most revolutionary work will be unspectacular everyday community building. There is nothing wrong with adrenaline-fuelled moments. But they are a relatively insignificant part within the momentous task of transforming ourselves and society.

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that it will take a new way of living to bring about [a revolutionary] situation.” There is no difference between how to live one’s life, how to organize as a revolutionary, and how to fuck shit up.

Another central statement in CrimethInc.’s piece is the following: “Enjoying ourselves is not simply something we must do to be strategic, to win recruits; it is an infallible indication of whether or not we have anything to offer.” This implies two important aspects of revolutionary politics that seem trivial but that also appear regularly forgotten: 1. The primary motivation is not “to smash capitalism,” “to abolish the state,” or “to create social justice.” All this is secondary. The primary motivation is the simple wish that people – *all* people – can live happy lives. When this is forgotten, the mentioned ideals turn into meaningless slogans at best or hypocritical excuses for totalitarian rule at worst. 2. Revolutionaries need to live lives and to create communities that a majority of people find attractive. When the non-initiated visit self-declared revolutionaries’ homes, centers, events, etc., they must feel that they have something to offer, something that can make their own lives better. If we want to be a revolutionary force, it is not enough to find people defending our subculture because we are a bunch of likeable freaks; we need to develop communities that a majority of people want to emulate – not necessarily the aesthetical details, but the principles on which our communities are built. If we have nothing to offer but filth, surliness, and elitism, we won’t get very far on this end. The following question has been posed many times, but it has become no less critical: are we happy to be a subculture that, at its best, occasionally irks the powerful and lends support to allies in times of struggle and need, while, at its worst, forms an unattractive social clique reproducing everything it professes to hate, namely status, hierarchy, and social exclusion, or do we want to be part of a revolutionary movement? If our ambition is the latter, the “being part” aspect is vital in fact. It cannot be the task of a selected few to “create” such movements – if they try, they will fail. In that sense I would also hesitate to call it “our job [...] to set off chain reactions

of revolt,” as the authors of “Fighting in the New Terrain” do. Such phrases are easily misinterpreted as vanguardism – certainly not the authors’ intention. In any case, revolts come and go. The best we can do is to be prepared and to make the most of the moment.

”Setting off chain reactions of revolt” is also a questionable strategic perspective. More urgent seems the question of how the scattered points of resistance can be turned into a movement? How can the praised ”multitude” really be a threat? Diversity has become a capitalist gimmick on every level. Perhaps we really need more solid networks and a common vision that we can articulate. The idea that anarchists must not envision anything because anarchist communities have to develop freely out of the people’s resistance is a very noble one theoretically – practically, though, it might mean nothing but permanently evading one of revolutionary politics’ most crucial question: what is it that we are really fighting for, and what are the alternatives that we have to offer?

”Fighting in the New Terrain” suggests that ”nothing makes people more defensive than the suggestion that they can and should enjoy themselves.” Here too, I am worried about unintended implications, namely that there is a community of enlightened and liberated anarchists out there who know how to enjoy themselves while the masses suppress their desires, are caught in delusion, and live lives of misery. Such allusions will not bring us closer to anyone – not to even mention the fact that they probably rest on false assumptions.

I wholeheartedly agree, however, with the proclamation that ”we are going to have to embrace the possibility that our dreams can come true.” This is the key of revolutionary activism. Without positivity we are nothing; we won’t enjoy ourselves, and we won’t make others believe that we do either. Furthermore, we have little choice: no matter how successful we are in trying to make life happier, the only thing worse than failing is not even trying. Needless to say, the ”we” in these sentences must be as wide as possible:

the dreams we pursue must be the dreams of many, otherwise the libertine will never be a revolutionary.

Maybe the following points can be added to ”Fighting in the New Terrain” in order to continue a debate about ”strategizing”:

1. In light of the daunting task to confront the system head-on, we have to re-emphasize the concept of building a ”counter society” that allows us to live our lives as independently as possible. It must not serve as a retreat, but as a terrain where we can gather strength, realize parts of our dreams in the here and now, and plan our attacks on the system. Don’t let them fool you: there might be no ”outside” of capitalism, but there are cracks that can widen – and they know it.
2. If we speak of joy equaling revolution, we need to make this tangible in our lives; if our communities aren’t perceived as joyful, they cannot be revolutionary either.
3. As anarchists, we need to understand our place and our role in today’s global community. The question is not how we can carry out the revolution or how we can persuade people of the wonders of anarchy, but how we can relate to wider social movements. There are many reasons for embracing an anarchist identity, but there are also many – cultural, political, and philosophical ones – for rejecting it.
4. The question of networking is crucial: while resistance must grow locally and networks must be built from the bottom up, the web of power relations that controls our lives can only be met by a web of dedicated resistance.
5. We must be able to articulate what we want. This will facilitate communication within anarchist circles about the direction of the struggle and will allow for much better communication beyond them. None of our visions must be cast in